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ABSTRACT

This statement, prepared by the National Council of Teachers of English, addresses the increasing problem of censorship in the public schools in the form of pressure to restrict or deny students access to certain books or periodicals deemed objectionable by individuals or groups on moral, political, religious, ethnic, racial, or philosophical grounds. The first section of the statement discusses the right to read and the English teacher, pointing out that virtually any work used in the classroom could be the subject of often arbitrary and irrational censorship. The next section contains an open letter to citizens from NCTE, providing a rationale against censorship, discussing why censorship is a threat to education, and what the community's responsibilities are in supporting free inquiry. The third section, addressed to teachers of English, librarians, and school administrators, provides a program of action for schools dealing with censorship, including procedures for book selection, suggestions for enlisting the support of the community, procedures for defending books under criticism, and a sample form for citizen's request for reconsideration of a work used in the curriculum. A selected bibliography concludes the statement. (HTH)

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The Students' Right to Read

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The current edition of *The Students' Right to Read* is an adaptation and updating of the original Council Statement, including "Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of a Work," prepared by the Committee on the Right to Read of the National Council of Teachers of English.

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The 1972 edition, as prepared by Kenneth L. Donelson, in 1982 was updated and greatly shortened for the sake of wider and complimentary distribution, and to acknowledge the issue of a new and complementary publication, *The Students' Right to Know.*

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The Students' Right to Read

The Right to Read and the Teacher of English

For many years, American schools have been pressured to restrict or deny students access to books or periodicals deemed objectionable by some individual or group on moral, political, religious, ethnic, racial, or philosophical grounds. These pressures have mounted in recent years, and English teachers have no reason to believe they will diminish. The fight against censorship is a continuing series of skirmishes, not a pitched battle leading to a final victory over censorship.

We can safely make two statements about censorship: first, any work is potentially open to attack by someone, somewhere, sometime, for some reason; second, censorship is often arbitrary and irrational. For example, classics traditionally used in English classrooms have been accused of containing obscene, heretical, or subversive elements. What English teacher could anticipate judgments such as the following—judgments characteristic of those made by many would-be censors:

Plato's *Republic:* "This book is un-Christian."

George Eliot's *Silas Marner:* "You can't prove what that dirty old man is doing with that child between chapters."

Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days:* "Very unfavorable to Mormons."

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter:* "A filthy book."

Shakespeare's *Macbeth:* "Too violent for children today."

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment:* "Serves as a poor model for young people."

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick:* "Contains homosexuality."

Modern works, even more than the classics, are criticized as "filthy," "un-American," "overly realistic" and "anti-war." Some books have been attacked merely for being "controversial," suggesting that for some people the purpose of education is not the investigation of ideas but rather the indoctrination of certain set beliefs and standards. The following statements represent complaints typical of those made against modern works of literature:

J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye:* "A dreadful dreary recital of sickness, sordidness, and sadism." (Without much question, Salinger's book has been for some time the most widely censored book in the United States.)

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five:* "Its repetitious obscenity and immorality merely degrade and defile, teaching nothing."

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird:* "The word *rape* is used several times. Children should not see this in any literature book."

Some groups and individuals have also raised objections to literature written specifically for young people. As long as novels intended for young people stayed at the intellectual and emotional level of *A Date for Marcy* or *A Touchdown for Thunderbird High,* censors could forego criticism. But many contemporary novels for adolescents focus on the real world of young people—drugs, premarital sex, alcoholism, divorce, high school gangs, school dropouts, racism, violence, and sensuality. English teachers willing to defend the classics and modern literature must be prepared to give equally spirited defense to serious and worthwhile adolescent novels.

Literature about ethnic or racial minorities remains "controversial" or "objectionable" to many adults. As long as groups such as blacks, Indians, orientals, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans "kept their proper place"—awarded them by an Anglo society—censors rarely raised their voices. But attacks have increased in frequency as minority groups have refused to observe their assigned "place." Though nominally the criticisms of racial or ethnic literature have usually been directed at "bad language," "suggestive situations," "questionable literary merit," or "ungrammatical English" (usually oblique complaints about the *different* dialect or culture of a group), the underlying motive for some attacks has unquestionably been racial. Typical of censors' criticisms of ethnic works are the following comments:

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man:* "The book is biased on the black question."

Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl:* "Obscene and blasphemous."

Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice:* "Totally objectionable and without any literary value."

Books are not alone in being subject to censorship. Magazines or newspapers used, recommended, or referred to in English classes have increasingly drawn

the censor's fire. Few libraries would regard their periodical collections as worthwhile or representative without some or all of the following publications, but all of them have been the target of censors on occasion:

National Geographic: "Nudity and sensationalism, especially in stories on barbaric foreign people."

Scholastic Magazine: "Doctrines opposing the beliefs of the majority, socialistic programs; promotes racial unrest and contains very detailed geography of foreign countries, especially those inhabited by dark people."

National Observer: "Right-wing trash with badly reported news."

New York Times: "That thing should be outlawed after printing the Pentagon papers and helping our country's enemies."

The immediate results of demands to censor books or periodicals vary. At times, school boards and administrators have supported and defended their teachers, their use of materials under fire, and the student's right of access to the materials. At other times, however, special committees have been formed to cull out "objectionable works" or "modern trash" or "controversial literature." Some teachers have been summarily reprimanded for assigning certain works, even to mature students. Others have been able to retain their positions only after initiating court action.

Not as sensational, but perhaps more important, are the long range results. Schools have removed from libraries and classrooms and English teachers have avoided using or recommending works which might make members of the community angry. Many students are consequently "educated" in a school atmosphere hostile to free inquiry. And many teachers learn to emphasize their own safety rather than their students' needs.

The problem of censorship does not derive solely from the small anti-intellectual, ultra-moral, or ultra-patriotic groups which will always function in a society that guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press. The present concern is rather with the frequency and force of attacks by others, often people of good will and the best intentions, some from within the teaching profession. The National Council of Teachers of English, the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, and the American Library Association, as well as the publishing industry and writers them-

selves, agree: pressures for censorship are great throughout our society.

The material that follows is divided into two sections. The first on "The Right to Read" is addressed to parents and the community at large. Separately printed by NCTE, it may be obtained in quantity for distribution. The other section, "A Program of Action," lists Council recommendations for establishing professional committees in every school to set up procedures for book selection, to work for community support, and to review complaints against any book or periodical.

The Right to Read

An open letter to the citizens of our country from the National Council of Teachers of English

> Where suspicion fills the air and holds scholars in line for fear of their jobs, there can be no exercise of the free intellect. . . . A problem can no longer be pursued with impunity to its edges. Fear stalks the classroom. The teacher is no longer a stimulant to adventurous thinking; she becomes instead a pipe line for safe and sound information. A deadening dogma takes the place of free inquiry. Instruction tends to become sterile; pursuit of knowledge is discouraged; discussion often leaves off where it should begin.
>
> Justice William O. Douglas,
> United States Supreme Court:
> Adler v. Board of Education, 1952.

The right to read, like all rights guaranteed or implied within our constitutional tradition, can be used wisely or foolishly. In many ways, education is an effort to improve the quality of choices open to all students. But to deny the freedom of choice in fear that it may be unwisely used is to destroy the freedom itself. For this reason, we respect the right of individuals to be selective in their own reading. But for the same reason, we oppose efforts of individuals or groups to limit the freedom of choice of others or to impose their own standards or tastes upon the community at large.

The right of any individual not just to read but to read whatever he or she wants to read is basic to a democratic society. This right is based on an assumption that the educated possess judgment and understanding and can be trusted with the determination of their own actions. In effect, the reader is freed from the bonds of chance. The reader is not limited by birth, geographic location, or time, since reading allows meeting people, debating philosophies, and experiencing events far beyond the narrow confines of an individual's own existence.

In selecting books for reading by young people, English teachers consider the contribution which each work may make to the education of the reader, its aesthetic value, its honesty, its readability for a particular group of students, and its appeal to adolescents. English teachers, however, may use different works for different purposes. The criteria for choos-

ing a work to be read by an entire class are somewhat different from the criteria for choosing works to be read by small groups. For example, a teacher might slect John Knowles' *A Separate Peace* for reading by an entire class, partly because the book has received wide critical recognition, partly because it is relatively short and will keep the attention of many slow readers, and partly because it has proved popular with many students of widely differing abilities. The same teacher, faced with the responsibility of choosing or recommending books for several small groups of students, might select or recommend books as different as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter,* Jack Schaefer's *Shane,* Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch,* Pierre Boulle's *The Bridge over the River Kwai,* Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations,* or Paul Zindel's *The Pigman,* depending upon the abilities and interests of the students in each group. And the criteria for suggesting books to individuals or for recommending something worth reading for a student who casually stops by after class are different from selecting material for a class or group. But the teacher selects, not censors, books. Selection implies that a teacher is free to choose this or that work, depending upon the purpose to be achieved and the student or class in question, but a book selected this year may be ignored next year, and the reverse. Censorship implies that certain works are not open to selection, this year or any year.

Wallace Stevens once wrote, "Literature is the better part of life. To this it seems inevitably necessary to add, provided life is the better part of literature." Students and parents have the right to demand that education today keep students in touch with the reality of the world outside the classroom. Much of classic literature asks questions as valid and significant today as when the literature first appeared, questions like "What is the nature of humanity?" "Why do people praise individuality and practice conformity?" "What do people need for a good life?" and "What is the nature of the good person?" But youth is the age of revolt. To pretend otherwise is to ignore a reality made clear to young people and adults alike on television and radio, in newspapers and magazines. English teachers must be free to employ books, classic or contemporary, which do not lie to the young about the perilous but wonderous times we live in, books which talk of the fears, hopes, joys, and frustrations people experience, books about people not only as they are but as they can be. English teachers forced through the pressures

of censorship to use only safe or antiseptic works are placed in the morally and intellectually untenable position of lying to their students about the nature and condition of mankind.

The teacher must exercise care to select or recommend works for class reading and group discussion. One of the most important responsibilities of the English teacher is developing rapport and respect among students. Respect for the uniqueness and potential of the individual, an important facet of the study of literature, should be emphasized in the English class. Literature classes should reflect the cultural contributions of many minority groups in the United States, just as they should acquaint students with contributions from the peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

The Threat to Education

Censorship leaves students with an inadequate and distorted picture of the ideals, values, and problems of their culture. Writers may often represent their culture, or they may stand to the side and describe and evaluate that culture. Yet partly because of censorship or the fear of censorship, many writers are ignored or inadequately represented in the public schools, and many are represented in anthologies not by their best work but by their "safest" or "least offensive" work.

The censorship pressures receiving the greatest publicity are those of small groups who protest the use of a limited number of books with some "objectionable" realistic elements, such as *Brave New World, Lord of the Flies, Catcher in the Rye, Johnny Got His Gun, Catch-22, Soul on Ice,* or *A Day No Pigs Would Die.* The most obvious and immediate victims are often found among our best and most creative English teachers, those who have ventured outside the narrow boundaries of conventional texts. Ultimately, however, the real victims are the students, denied the freedom to explore ideas and pursue truth wherever and however they wish.

Great damage may be done by book committees appointed by national or local organizations to pore over anthologies, texts, library books, and paperbacks to find passages which advocate, or seem to advocate, causes or concepts or practices these organizations condemn. As a result, some publishers, sensitive to possible objections, carefully exclude sentences or selections that might conceivably offend some group, somehow, sometime, somewhere.

The Community's Responsibility

American citizens who care about the improvement of education are urged to join students, teachers, librarians, administrators, boards of education, and professional and scholarly organizations in support of the students' right to read. Only widespread and informed support in every community can assure that

enough citizens are interested in the development and maintenance of a superior school system to guarantee its achievement;

malicious gossip, ignorant rumors, and deceptive letters to the editor will not be circulated without challenge and correction;

newspapers will be convinced that the public sincerely desires objective school news reporting, free from slanting or editorial comment which destroys confidence in and support for schools;

the community will not permit its resources and energies to be dissipated in conflicts created by special interest groups striving to advance their ideologies or biases; and

faith in democratic traditions and processes will be maintained.

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A Program of Action

Censorship in schools is a widespread problem. Teachers of English, librarians, and school administrators can best serve students, literature, and the profession today if they prepare now to face pressures sensibly, demonstrating on the one hand a willingness to consider the merits of any complaint and on the other the courage to defend their literature program with intelligence and vigor. The Council therefore recommends that every school undertake the following two-step program to protect the students' right to read:

the establishment of a representative committee to consider book selection procedures and to screen complaints; and

a vigorous campaign to establish a community atmosphere in which local citizens may be enlisted to support the freedom to read.

Procedures for Book Selection

Although one may defend the freedom to read without reservation as one of the hallmarks of a free society, there is no substitute for informed, professional, and qualified book selection. English teachers are better qualified to choose and recommend books for their classes than persons not prepared in the field. Nevertheless, administrators have certain legal and professional responsibilities. For these reasons and as a matter of professional courtesy, they should be kept informed about the criteria and the procedures used by English teachers in selecting books and the titles of the books used.

In each school the English department should develop its own statement explaining why literature is taught and how books are chosen for each class. This statement should be on file with the administration before any complaints are received. The statement should also support the teacher's right to choose supplementary materials and to discuss controversial issues insofar as they are relevant.

Operating within such a policy, the English department should take the following steps:

Establish a committee to help other English teachers find exciting and challenging books of potential value to students in a specific school. Schools without departments or small schools with a few

English teachers should organize a permanent committee charged with the responsibility of alerting other teachers to new books just published or old books now forgotten which might prove valuable in the literature program.

Devote time at each department meeting to reviews and comments by the above committee or plan special meetings for this purpose. Free and open meetings to discuss books of potential value to students would seem both reasonable and normal for any English department. Teachers should be encouraged to challenge any books recommended or to suggest titles hitherto ignored.

Require that each English teacher give a rationale for any book to be read by an entire class. Written rationales for all books read by an entire class would serve the department well if censorship should strike. A file of rationales should serve as impressive evidence to the administration and the community that English teachers have not chosen their books lightly or haphazardly.

Report to the administration the books that will be used for class reading by each English teacher.

Such a procedure gives each teacher the right to expect support from fellow teachers and administrators whenever someone objects to a book.

The Legal Problem

Apart from the professional and moral issues involved in censorship, there are legal matters about which NCTE cannot give advice. The Council is not a legal authority. Across the nation, moreover, conditions vary so much that no one general principle applies. In some states, for example, textbooks are purchased from public funds and supplied free to students; in others, students must rent or buy their own texts.

The legal status of textbook adoption lists also varies. Some lists include only those books which must be taught and allow teachers freedom to select additional titles; other lists are restrictive, containing the only books which may be required for all students.

As a part of sensible preparations for handling attacks on books, each school should ascertain what laws apply to it.

Preparing the Community

To respond to complaints about books, every school should have a committee of teachers (and possibly

students, parents, and other representatives from the community) organized to

inform the community about book selection procedures;

enlist the support of citizens, possibly by explaining the place of literature in the educational process or by discussing at meetings of parents and other community groups the books used at that school; and

consider any complaints against any work.

No community is so small that it lacks concerned people who care about their children and the educational program of the schools. No community is so small that it lacks readers who will support the English teachers in defending books when complaints are received. Unhappily, English teachers too often fail to seek out these people and to cultivate their good will and support before censorship strikes.

Defending the Books

Despite the care taken to select worthwhile books for student reading and the qualifications of teachers selecting and recommending books, occasional objections to a work will undoubtedly be made. All books are potentially open to criticism in one or more general areas: the treatment of ideologies, of minorities, of love and sex; the use of language not acceptable to some people; the type of illustrations; the private life or political affiliations of the author or, in a few cases, the illustrator.

If some attacks are made by groups or individuals frankly hostile to free inquiry and open discussion, others are made by misinformed or misguided people who, acting on emotion or rumor, simply do not understand how the books are to be used. Others are made by well-intentioned and conscientious people who fear that harm will come to some segment of the community if a particular book is read or recommended.

What should be done upon receipt of a complaint?

If the complainant telephones, listen courteously and refer him or her to the teacher involved. That teacher should be the first person to discuss the book with the person objecting to its use.

If the complainant is not satisfied, invite him or her to file the complaint in writing, but make no commitments, admissions of guilt, or threats.

If the complainant writes, contact the teacher involved and let that teacher call the complainant.

Sometimes the problem seems less serious and more easily resolved through personal contact over the phone. If the complainant is not satisfied, invite him or her to file the complaint in writing on a form prepared for this purpose. (See sample.)

Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of a Work

Author _____ Paperback____ Hardcover____

Title _____

Publisher (If known) _____

Request initiated by _____

Telephone _____ Address _____

City _____ Zip Code _____

Complainant represents

___ Himself/Herself

___ (Name organization) _____

___ (Identify other group) _____

1. Have you been able to discuss this work with the teacher or librarian who ordered it or who used it?
   ___ Yes ___ No
2. What do you understand to be the general purpose for using this work?
   a. Provide support for a unit in the curriculum?
      ___ Yes ___ No
   b. Provide a learning experience for the reader in one kind of literature?
      ___ Yes ___ No
   c. Other _____
3. Did the general purpose for the use of the work, as described by the teacher or librarian, seem a suitable one to you?
   ___ Yes ___ No
   If not, please explain. _____
4. What do you think is the general purpose of the author in this book? _____
5. In what ways do you think a work of this nature is not suitable for the use the teacher or librarian wishes to carry out? _____
6. Have you been able to learn what is the students' reponse to this work?
   ___ Yes ___ No
7. What response did the students make? _____
8. Have you been able to learn from your school library what book reviewers or other students of literature have written about this work?
   ___ Yes ___ No

9. Would you like the teacher or librarian to give you a written summary of what book reviewers and other students have written about this book or film?
   ___ Yes ___ No
10. Do you have negative reviews of the book?
   ___ Yes ___ No
11. Where were they published? _____
12. Would you be willing to provide summaries of the reviews you have collected?
   ___ Yes ___ No
13. What would you like your library/school to do about this work?
   ___ Do not assign/lend it to my child.
   ___ Return it to the staff selection committee/department for reevaluation.
   ___ Other—Please explain. _____
   _____
14. In its place, what work would you recommend that would convey as valuable a picture and perspective of the subject treated? _____
   _____

Signature _____
Date _____

At first, except for politely acknowledging the complaint and explaining the established procedures, the English teacher should do nothing. The success of much censorship depends upon frightening an unprepared school or English department into some precipitous action. A standardized procedure will take the sting from the first outburst of criticism. When the responsible objector learns that he or she will be given a fair hearing through following the proper channels, he or she is more likely to be satisfied. The idle censor, on the other hand, may well be discouraged from taking further action. A number of advantages will be provided by the form, which will

formalize the complaint,

indicate specifically the work in question,

identify the complainant,

suggest how many others support the complaint,

require the complainant to think through objections in order to make an intelligent statement on work (1, 2, and 3),

cause the complainant to evaluate the work for other groups than merely the one he or she first hand in mind (4),

establish his or her familiarity with the work (5),

give the complainant an opportunity to consider the criticism about the work and the teacher's purpose in using the work (6, 7, and 8), and

give the complainant an opportunity to suggest alternative actions to be taken on the work (9 and 10).

The committee reviewing complaints should be available on short notice to consider the completed "Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of a Work" and to call in the complainant and the teacher involved for a conference. Members of the committee should have reevaluated the work in advance of the meeting, and the group should be prepared to explain its findings. Membership of the committee should should ordinarily include an administrator, the English department chair, and at least two classroom teachers of English. But the department might consider the advisability of including members from the community and the local or state NCTE affiliate. As a matter of course, recommendations from the committee would be forwarded to the superintendent, who would in turn submit them to the board of education, the legally constituted authority in the school.

Teachers and administrators should recognize that the responsibility for selecting works for class study lies with classroom teachers and that the responsibility for reevaluating any work begins with the review committee. Both teachers and administrators should refrain from discussing the objection with the complainant, the press, or community groups. Once the complaint has been filed, the authority for handling the situation must ultimately rest with the administration and school board.

Freedom of inquiry is essential to education in a democracy. To establish conditions essential for freedom, teachers and administrators need to follow procedures similar to those recommended here. Where schools resist unreasonable pressures, the cases are seldom publicized and students continue to read works as they wish. The community that entrusts students to the care of an English teacher should also trust that teacher to exercise professional judgment in selecting or recommending books. The English teacher can be free to teach literature, and students can be free to read whatever they wish only if informed and vigilant groups, within the profession and without, unite in resisting unfair pressures.

Resources

Special materials to assist teachers and administrators are available from the National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801.

The Students' Right to Read. Additional copies of this statement are available upon request.

Censors in the Classroom: The Mind Benders. Edward B. Jenkinson. Southern Illinois University Press, 1979

Censorship Game and How to Play It. Benjamin C. Cox. The National Council for the Social Studies Bulletin, No. 50. Washington, D.C., 1977

Dealing with Censorship. Ed. James E. Davis. National Council of Teachers of English, 1979

Lobbying for Freedom: A Citizen's Guide to Fighting Censorship at the State Level. St. Martin's Press, 1975

Students' Right to Know. Eds. Lee Burress and Edward B. Jenkinson. National Council of Teachers of English, 1982

Valuable material is also available from the American Library Association, 50 East Huron Street, Chicago, Illinois 60611, particularly the *Library Bill of Rights* and the *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom,* the latter a bi-monthly publication available by subscription.